

Gen. William Brattle House
Cambridge, Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-274

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Massachusetts

Historic American Buildings Survey
Frank Chouteau Brown, District Officer
76 Chestnut Street, Boston, Mass.

ADDENDUM TO
GEN. WILLIAM BRATTLE HOUSE
42 Brattle Street
Cambridge
Middlesex County
Massachusetts

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REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

APPENDIX TO:
GENERAL WILLIAM BRATTLE HOUSE

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Location: 42 Brattle Street, Cambridge, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.

Significance: Built in ca. 1730 for Cambridge lawyer and politician William Brattle, the house is popularly known for its owner's British sympathies rather than for its architectural significance. In Cambridge, the Brattle house is one of "Tory Row," a group of pre-revolutionary structures owned by Loyalists; William Brattle fled Boston in 1774. During the nineteenth century, Brattle's estate gradually was subdivided and the neighborhood grew up around it. In 1889, the Cambridge Social Union purchased the house and renovated it to suit their needs. Despite its exterior alterations, the Brattle house street facade remains a significant example of pre-revolutionary war architecture and its stair attests to the quality of early American craftsmanship.

Description: The Brattle house is a two and half story structure built up from a two room, center-hall plan. It is capped by a gambrel roof, that is punctuated by three dormer windows and terminated by a bracketed cornice. The body of the building is clapboard. Six-over-six light and double-hung sash windows define its five bay facade. The center bay includes the entrance door, which is capped by a triangular pediment and framed by pilasters. However, the Brattle house fenestration is a nineteenth-century memento for its six-over-six lights replaced earlier windows and frames, and also, the present entry (enclosed vestibule) replaced a ca. 1860 bracketed hood.

Other structural changes involved the fireplace and its requisite chimney on the south side of the hall; according to the architects' notes, the fireplace was removed from the southwest wall of the southeast room. The present fireplace and chimney rise from the rear addition. Meanwhile, the northeast room, or "right parlor," is noted for its woodwork, thought to be original, and original fireplace surrounds in the southwest wall.

Inside, the Brattle house withstood many alterations. The Cambridge Social Union and later, the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, renovated the house for their educational and social activities. For example, in 1948 the later constructed the rear addition. A decade later (1955), an interior fire destroyed much of the remaining eighteenth-century woodwork. Fortunately, the staircase newel post and elaborately turned and carved balusters survived the fire.

History: The house was constructed for William Brattle, a wealthy player in Cambridge society. Brattle practiced law, dabbled in politics, and served the Crown faithfully. Brattle obtained the rank of major general in Massachusetts Bay Militia in 1771; however, the tide turned against him. As Boston tempers flared, Brattle's Tory sympathies jeopardized his political position. Brattle fled Boston in 1774. During the American Revolution, Thomas Mifflin, an aide-de-camp to George Washington and commissary general, lived in the house. Brattle's son, Thomas, reclaimed his family estate after the cessation of formal hostilities. Thomas Brattle lived in the house from 1784 until his death in 1801. While in residence, Thomas Brattle accumulated property -- climaxing at twenty two acres -- which then was landscaped. The grounds included fruit trees, flowers, a pond, and a grotto. A granite and wood fence was erected around 1847-48.

Between 1801 and 1889, the Brattle property whittled down to its present acreage. Use of the house ceased serving its residential function in 1889; at that time, it was sold to the Cambridge Social

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Union. That organization dedicated itself to providing intellectual and social activities for Cambridge's young adults. To do so, the social union renovated the house and built "Brattle Hall" next door. The hall was built by architects Longfellow, Alden, and Harlow; it housed lectures and theatrical performances. The Cambridge Social Union metamorphosed into the Cambridge Center for Adult Education by 1938. This new entity sold Brattle Hall ten years later. The educational center expanded the Brattle house proper to meet their spatial requirements.

Sources:

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Retting, Robert Bell. Guide to Cambridge Architecture Ten Walking Tours. Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press, 1969. Specifically, the Brattle Street tour ("C").